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ABSTRACT

Although American students have always been somewhat diverse, newly identified groups with special needs appear on community horizons every year. Education is one arena from which response to diversity is necessary. Ethnic, socioeconomic, disability, and gender status differ from one region to another making communities the ideal nexus for change. Some communities have taken a pro-active approach to cultural pluralism, and several model programs are described. Successful approaches reflect community exigencies, but all emphasize the following components: (1) collaborative development of a clear belief system which respects the nature of and demands excellence for all students; (2) use of an inclusive belief system as a guiding focus for school and community; (3) intervention strategies for at-risk students involving community agencies, businesses, and constituents in cooperative ventures; (4) a globalized curriculum which acknowledges the value of differences and teaches students to live in a heterogeneous, interdependent world; and (4) a holistic approach to instruction where whole children are educated in whole classrooms and are never labeled. Responding to cultural differences means restructuring public schools and supporting new practices to address the reality of plurality in the schools. (Contains 12 references.) (LL)

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REFLECTING COMMUNITY DIVERSITY IN THE SCHOOL

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REFLECTING COMMUNITY DIVERSITY IN THE SCHOOL

The American Way

American schools have always served culturally diverse students. In the past two decades, however, differences between and among students have expanded. The *types* of differences as well as the sheer *numbers* of students representing them will continue to multiply. In the venerable one room school, teachers could expect their student bodies to reflect religious and ethnic minorities, extremes of wealth and poverty, and differing learning abilities. These types of students continue to fill our schools but are joined by newly emerging groups.

Demographic Changes

* Immigrants in early schools derived largely from European countries with which Americans shared a cultural heritage. In the 1980s Asia and South America replaced Europe as the leading sources of immigrants and refugees (U. S. Census, 1989). Immigrants in our communities today are likely to come from cultures which are linguistically, religiously and sociologically different from the dominant culture of earlier times.

* Families with children represent the fastest growing homeless group in the United States. In some shelters, families represent over fifty percent of inhabitants.

No community is immune from this phenomenon. In 1988, Reston, Virginia, an affluent suburb, turned away 1,000 people from its new community shelter. One fourth of its 80 beds were taken by children (Hodgkinson, 1989, p. 7).

* Children with acquired and inherited drug dependencies and incapacitated with fetal alcohol syndrome are part of the 90s plurality.

* At a time when 70 million baby boomers are reaching middle age and stretching the resources of social services, 21 percent of all children are poor and the rate among African- American children is a shocking 48 percent (Stern, 1987).

* In 1989, 8.6 percent of babies were born to unmarried teens (NSPRA, 1992), and in 1988 over four million Americans worked full time but were eligible for poverty benefits (Hodgkinson, 1989).

* Little is known about the origin of learning disabilities. Possibly, there were youngsters in one room schools with dyslexia, perceptual disorders, or attention span deficits. Such learners, if they did exist, were not sufficient in numbers to drain school resources at a time when drop-outs

could hope to earn a living. Whatever the history of learning disorders, their prevalence among school children today cannot be ignored.

* Juvenile gangs, though not a serious problem in America's heartland, are nonetheless a new and depressing problem for urban schools.

* Indigenous minority groups (African and Native Americans and Hispanics) have never been well served by mainstream education but, given their relatively small numbers and lack of political influence, this problem was rarely addressed in early schools. Today we know that people of color are the fastest growing groups in our population. Future students are likely to evolve largely from indigenous minority groups. California already has a majority minority population in the public schools, as do the ten largest school districts in America.

* Women and minorities, two groups poorly served by mainstream education in the past, represent the largest numbers of new entrants into the labor force. This phenomenon will continue into the next century,

creating concern about the education of girls, particularly in science and mathematics, and minorities at a time when America faces her most critical economic threat from abroad.

* American family structures are changing. For example, the numbers of latchkey children (children unsupervised in the home after school) has proliferated in the past decade. There are more single parent families, more blended families, and more mothers in the work force. All of these trends portend changes in student composition.

* Children with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) bring unique challenges to community schools. Virtually unknown before 1982, these youngsters, though still few in number, illustrate the unpredictable changes apparent in schools today.

* Japanese- American businesses have become a social force in many communities. In Dublin, Ohio, for example, where a Honda plant was located in the early 80s, Japanese executives and their families presented new mandates to community leaders.

The Melting Pot Myth

In summary, although American students have always been somewhat diverse, newly identified groups with special needs appear on community horizons every year. Heretofore, these groups either didn't exist or were so low in numbers that they didn't stretch community educational resources. Such groups, however, are no longer peering through the windows of our schools; they are breaking down the doors. What does this mean for community education? Clearly, there are and will continue to be more children at risk of school failure than ever before in the nation's history.

The "melting pot" theory which sought to assimilate cultural identity into one big family no longer predominates. It is now essential for communities to openly acknowledge the extraordinary differences which exist in our schools. The issue of plurality transcends nationalities and ethnic affiliation. The heterogeneity of American communities reflects many identities. No town or city, however small, is immune from this striking plurality. Education is one arena from which response to diversity is absolutely necessary. If the United States is to be strong at a time when global interdependence and competition are proliferating, all communities must seek and support policies and practices which educate all students and model tolerance for every group.

A Mandate for Communities

Joseph Campbell (1989) wrote that for four thousand years human beings lived within boundaries of clan, religion, state,

nation, family, and ethnicity. All could afford to represent those outside their boundaries as deficient. For the first time in the history of humankind, these affiliations aren't sufficient to make one group or another successful.

It's an interdependent world. The wage rate in Singapore affects the minimum wage in Minneapolis; the Japanese prop up our economy and we support theirs; American hegemony abroad is waning; the Pacific rim has become an economic force to reckon with and the European common market represents yet more competition. How are communities to cope with such massive world changes unless their education systems rest on reality?

Reality is that the United States is more culturally diverse than ever before, which can be a strength or a weakness depending on how its handled. Types of plurality vary from one region to the next, making communities the ideal nexus for change. The matter of human differences is an educational issue. Community leaders must not be content to dream of halcyon days when American education was the best in the world but must support new practices. The nature of students has changed, world political and economic orders have changed, and the role of communities has changed. It is a mistake to believe that new problems can be fixed with old solutions. Responding to cultural differences means restructuring public schools.

Public Schools

For too long American schools have operated for a so-called normal population of white, middle class children whose developmental cycles coalesce. Students who don't fit the mold are quickly (usually by third grade) labeled as failures, making it very likely that they will never succeed in school. By these standards, there are now entire school districts where every single child is at risk. The business of sorting, selecting, and labeling students is pernicious. Achievement in school, unfortunately, has as much to do with what students perceive is expected of them as any other variable. Specifically, students who get the message that they are failures are likely to be failures. Edmunds (quoted in Dash, 1988) said, "There has never been a time in the life of the American public school when we have not known all we needed in order to teach all those whom we choose to teach. What has historically been lacking, no less today than in the past, is the commitment and will to choose to teach all the children who enter our nation's schools" (p. 27).

Effectively educating all children requires a solid belief that all children can be educated. Heretofore, the lowest functioning students were more or less written off as impossible to teach while resources were diverted to so-called normal children. Today, whole districts are comprised of low functioning students; the so-called normal children are not sufficient in number to guarantee the survival of the nation and we can no longer afford to ignore those students who are failed by the system. *There are no*

bodies of normal children, only groups representing the full spectrum of human condition. Diversity is integral to any group of students, particularly in the United States; students with unique learning needs are not an anomaly.

Developing a Belief System

> Before success comes in any man's life,
> he is sure to meet with much temporary
> defeat, and, perhaps, some failure.
> When defeat overtakes a man, the easiest
> and most logical thing to do is to quit.
> That is exactly what the majority of men do.
>
> Napolean Hill

An essential component for collaborative development of public schools is a mission statement that "embraces the philosophy that the school is committed to all students...that affirms human diversity, that validates the history and culture of all ethnic groups, that is based on high expectations for academic success for all students, and that encourages students' active participation in school" (Benard, 1991, p. 11). It is doubtful that any school will deliver quality education to all children unless it makes this task a joyful, encompassing, growth producing, controlling purpose.

Model Programs

The prognosis for schools is not all grim. While no one knows with certainty what successful schools of the future will look like, several communities have taken a pro-active stance toward defining them. In Transylvania County, North Carolina, community

problems included poverty, illiteracy, a scattered system of social services which were difficult to access, programs spread around a rural area and not centralized, and little collaboration between schools and social service agencies. These problems were addressed in a holistic manner with the Cities in Schools program designed to address dropouts. The program "brings representatives from businesses, social service agencies, human resource systems, and volunteer groups into the schools to help at-risk students and their families. Cities in Schools centralizes services and eliminates the problem of families having to navigate a maze of bureaucratic and often overlapping service delivery system" (Nations Cities Weekly, 1991, p. 6).

Understanding that the seeds of failure are planted early, the Pasadena Unified School District developed a model program for working with four year olds. The program was designed to provide early intervention and to make wide use of an advisory committee representing a cross- section of the community (Klentschy, 1990). The Luther Burbank District in California developed a school and community counseling program in 1987, linking schools and social service agencies to address the dropout problem. This initiative supported the view that "when only one dimension of what affects a child is working toward improvement of the whole child, little progress can be realized. However, when a multi-dimensional support system is in place, potential for success is enhanced substantially" (Foley and Engleman, 1990, p. 4). An innovative program in DeBeque, Colorado (1992) involved students in community

planning. The mayor, Dennis LeTurgez, believes in "teamwork and cooperation between all entities, including school, county, town, and the business community" (Colorado Municipalities, 1992, p. 31).

In Dublin, Ohio, community leaders responded favorably to the changes inherent in the building of a Honda factory in their area. The adult education program in this formerly quiet, middle class suburb was expanded to include classes in Japanese and English. School buildings were used for weekend classes for the children of displaced Japanese business executives. Cultural exchanges were encouraged. The introduction of a large number of Japanese into the community enriched rather than depleted community resources and Dublin is now an affluent and highly desirable place to live, recognized for its outstanding public schools.

Conclusions

In sum, American schools are becoming more diverse, creating challenges never before experienced. Cultural plurality, including ethnic, socio-economic, disability, and gender status, differs from one region to another making communities close to the heartbeat of change. There remains a lethargy and confusion in many regions about how to cope with the enormous stress being placed on school districts and social service agencies because of human differences. Nonetheless, some progressive communities have taken a pro-active approach to cultural plurality. Successful approaches which address diversity are idiosyncratic (reflecting community exigencies) but emphasize at least the following components:

1. Collaborative development of a clear belief system which respects the nature of and demands excellence for all students;
2. Use of an inclusive belief system as a guiding focus for school and community and a joyful, learning experience for all citizens;
3. Intervention strategies for at-risk students which involve community agencies, businesses, and constituents in creative cooperative ventures;
4. A globalized curriculum which not only acknowledges the value of differences but which also teaches people how to live in a heterogeneous, interdependent world;
5. A holistic approach to instruction where whole children are educated in whole classrooms and are never labeled, sorted, or selected for preferment.

The barriers between school success and individual differences are a confection of an earlier time. They are and always have been artificial. The barriers between community and school are also artificial. It will take the combined resources and goodwill of all citizens to address the immensely complex issues of plurality in the schools.

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